

Appendix L

Amanda Boyd/USFWS



Spotted sandpiper

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

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In August 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (draft CCP/EA) for Nantucket National Wildlife Refuge (refuge, NWR). The refuge currently covers approximately 21 acres of barrier beach dunes on Nantucket Island, located in the Atlantic Ocean approximately 25 miles south of Cape Cod. This refuge is part of the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex (refuge complex) headquartered in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

The Nantucket NWR draft CCP/EA evaluates three alternatives for managing the refuge over the next 15 years. It carefully considers each alternative's direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment and their potential contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

The draft CCP/EA restates the refuge's purposes, creates a vision for the next 15 years, and proposes three goals to be achieved through plan implementation. Alternative B is identified as the Service-preferred alternative. Chapter 2 in the draft plan details the respective goals, objectives, and strategies for each of the three alternatives. Chapter 4 describes the consequences of implementing those actions under each alternative. The draft CCP/EA plan's appendices provide additional information supporting the assessment and specific proposals in alternative B. A brief overview of each alternative follows.

Alternative A (Current Management): The Council of Environmental Quality regulations on implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require this "No Action" alternative, which we define as continuing current management. Alternative A includes our existing programs and activities and serves as the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. Under alternative A, we would maintain the status quo in managing this 21-acre refuge for the next 15 years, including actions which do not strictly follow Service guidance documents, because these management decisions and activities were established prior to recent guidance documents. No major changes would be made to current management practices. We would continue to rely on The Trustees of Reservations to provide information to the public regarding the refuge and its resources, conduct piping plover and seal management, and monitor the beaches for public compliance with piping plover and seal management.

Alternative B (Enhanced Wildlife Management and Visitor Services; the Service-preferred Alternative): This alternative includes an array of management actions that, in our professional judgment, works best toward achieving the purposes of the refuge, our vision and goals for those lands, the Refuge System mission, and the goals in State and regional conservation plans. Alternative B seeks a balance between wildlife protection (through beach closure and symbolic fencing for key habitats) and access for the compatible, wildlife-dependent priority public uses at the refuge. In addition, this alternative emphasizes larger landscape-level conservation of coastal dune and beach habitat for priority avian and marine mammal species through the protection of additional lands on Nantucket and associated islands. Management would be consistent with State and Federal piping plover and tern guidelines, and would also afford protection to staging terns in the late summer and fall. It establishes adaptive beach closure zones designed to allow compatible beach recreation while protecting important wildlife habitat. It proposes management on the refuge, but also looks beyond the 21-acre refuge to larger scale conservation and land protection throughout Nantucket. We propose to achieve this through partnerships, cooperative management, and a 2,036-acre expansion to the refuge (see appendix G, Land Protection Plan (LPP)). It calls for a coordinated regional study of bird use (specifically roseate and common terns) to help determine future refuge management and beach access to provide protection for key species and habitat while attempting to allow for compatible, wildlife recreation into the future. This alternative would also enhance our current level of visitor services, research, inventory and monitoring, law enforcement, and partnerships, all within the context of landscape-level conservation.

Alternative C (Wildlife Diversity and Natural Processes Emphasis): Alternative C seeks to enhance biodiversity and environmental health, so that existing, traditional recreational uses would be restricted in favor of increased protection of focal waterbird species and seals. It is similar to alternative B but takes protection one step further by proposing to extend seasonal closures to vehicle access over most of the refuge between April 1 and September 15 each year to minimize disturbance to dynamic beach habitat. Under alternative C, we would expand our visitor services program. However, these efforts would be more focused

on providing opportunities on the refuge and less on working with partners off of the refuge. We distributed the draft CCP/EA for a 60-day period of public review and comment from August 2 to October 1, 2011. We held two public meetings on September 15, 2011, in Nantucket, Massachusetts: one in the afternoon and one in the evening. Throughout the 60-day comment period, we received 38 comment submissions representing individuals, organizations, and State and Federal agencies. Appendix J in the final CCP includes a summary of those comments and our responses to them.

After reviewing the proposed management actions, and considering all public comments and our responses to them, I have determined that the analysis in the EA is sufficient to support my findings. I am selecting alternative B, as presented in the draft CCP/EA with the minor changes listed below, to implement as the final CCP. The following are the changes we made in the final CCP:

- We provided updated information on the numbers of seals, common terns, and roseate terns using the refuge.
- We changed the dates for staging tern closures to mid- to late July through mid-September. This change reflects new information received during the past two summers of field observation by refuge staff.
- We provided updated information about visitor use numbers and activities.
- We removed the threshold for seal protection after consulting with the National Marine Fisheries Service.
- We provided updated socioeconomic information.

I concur that alternative B, with the above changes and in comparison to the other two alternatives, will:

- Best fulfill the mission of the Refuge System.
- Best achieve the refuge's purposes, vision, and goals.
- Best maintain and, where appropriate, restore the refuge's ecological integrity.
- Best address the major issues identified during the planning process.
- Is most consistent with the principles of sound fish and wildlife management.

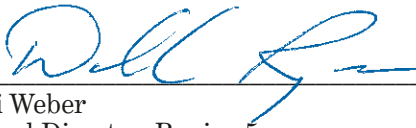
Specifically, in comparison to the other two alternatives, alternative B would make an important contribution to conserving Federal trust resources of concern in southern New England coastal habitats by providing key nesting and staging habitat for piping plover and roseate terns. The plans to increase collaboration with partners to enhance biological and visitor services programs are reasonable, practicable, and will result in the most efficient management of the refuge and best serve the American public. Our ability to achieve conservation goals is further enhanced with the LPP, approved by the Service's Director on January 15, 2013. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) includes the EA by reference.

I have reviewed the predicted beneficial and adverse impacts associated with alternative B that are presented in chapter 4 of the draft CCP/EA, and compared them to the other alternatives. I specifically reviewed the context and intensity of those predicted impacts over the short and long term, and considered cumulative effects. I believe socioeconomic, natural and cultural resource, and visitor impacts would be generally positive or negligible over the long term. In addition, refuge revenue sharing payments would continue, and possibly increase with any addition of lands to the Nantucket NWR. The addition of refuge staff on Nantucket Island, and increased visitation by staff due to increased biological and visitor services efforts on the refuge, may provide a net benefit to the local economy over the next 15 years through the use of local goods and services. The potential land acquisitions to Nantucket NWR may also increase visitation to the area, and visitors are expected to make local purchases in conjunction with their visit.

Regarding natural resources, minor and temporary impacts are expected to soils and vegetation from any monitoring and management, including invasive species management. The addition of refuge staff and seasonal zone closures would ensure greater protection of soils and vegetation through better regulation of visitor access to sensitive nesting, staging, and seal haul-out areas. An access trail would funnel foot traffic on a designated path, and away from sensitive dune habitat. Increased visitor services, including interpretation and educational programs, will increase awareness and understanding of refuge resources and management. Other visitor services programs would focus on recreational activities, including fishing, to continue to provide opportunities for recreational use of the refuge and to minimize conflicts with user groups.

In summary, my evaluation concludes that implementing alternative B would not result in any concerns with public health or safety, nor result in adverse implications to any unique cultural or natural characteristics of the geographic areas, including wetlands or federally listed species. I have considered how the proposed actions would interact with other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions to determine there is no major cumulative impact. I find that implementing alternative B adheres to all legal mandates and Service policies, and will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Therefore, I have concluded that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required, and this FONSI is appropriate and warranted.

ACTING



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18 FEB 2013

Date